Excavations at Grim's Ditch, Mongewell, 1974

By John Hinchliffe

With a contribution by

Mark Robinson

INTRODUCTION

In the winter of 1973–4 the Oxfordshire County Council Highways Department began a scheme to widen the A4074 Crowmarsh Gifford–Reading road at Ice House Hill, Mongewell (fig. 1). The work involved the destruction of a ten metre length of the South Oxfordshire Grim's Ditch at SU 617879, opposite the gate to Carmel College (fig. 2). After the initial works, principally the felling of trees on the site, time was allowed for the Oxfordshire Archaeological Unit to carry out a rescue excavation on the earthwork, under the direction of the writer.

The writer wishes to thank the Highways Department for their help and co-operation throughout the excavation. He also wishes to thank the members of the South Oxfordshire Archaeological Group and the Wallingford Archaeological Society who assisted during the excavations, especially Clive Hart, who gave up so much of his time and whose advice and assistance at every stage of the excavation were invaluable. He also wishes to express his appreciation of the efforts of the Unit full-time staff who worked on the excavation, especially Pete Crane, who acted as Site Supervisor.

THE EXCAVATION

The Bank

The bank (fig. 4) survived to a height of 0·70 m. below the base of the modern topsoil. The width of the spread of surviving bank material was *c.* 5 m. Sealed beneath it was the pre-construction ground surface (fig. 4, layer 5), some 0·20 m. in thickness above the natural chalk. There was no trace of any turf line, and the light brown soil, containing broken fragments of chalk, appeared to have been under plough before the bank's erection. From this layer several fragments of coarse, hand-made pottery were recovered.

Immediately on top of the old ground surface lay what remained of the bank. As the first material thrown up in the ditch digging would have been the soil of the old ground surface, this redeposited soil formed the core of the earthwork (fig. 4, 4), covered by the subsequent upcast of chalk rubble (fig. 4, 3) from the rock-cut ditch. From both the redeposited soil and chalk upcast further sherds of pottery were recovered.

The remainder of the body of the surviving bank, above these layers, consisted of rather more broken-up, smaller chalk fragments and some soil (fig. 4, 2). This

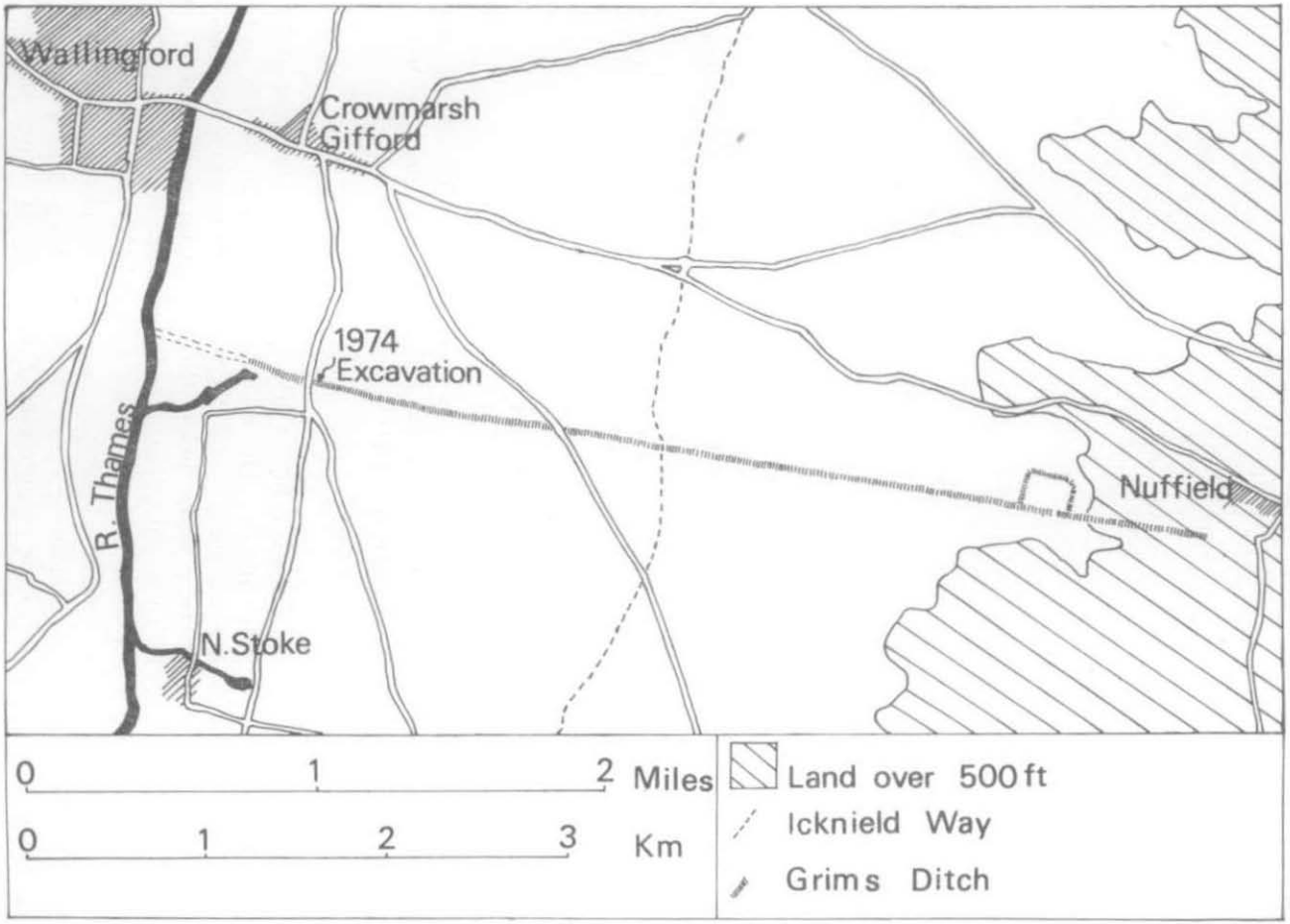

FIG. 1
South Oxfordshire Grim's Ditch.

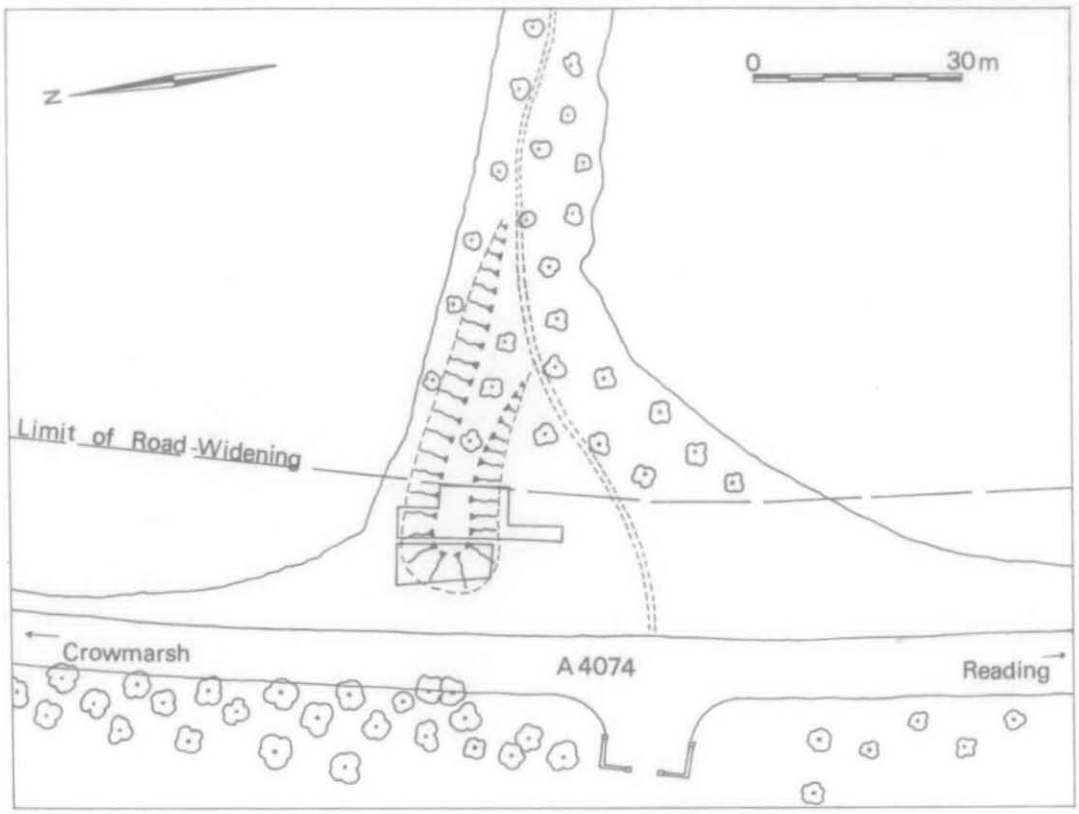

FIG. 2
Position of Trenches.

material had almost certainly possessed the same consistency as the lower chalk rubble (3), but the action of frost, tree roots and other natural agencies, as well as human and animal interference, had reduced it to a more friable texture.

The Ditch

The precise position of the ditch was not at first appreciated, as a linear quarry (FIG. 3, C) was initially mistaken for it. The true ditch lay a little further to the south (FIG. 3, A), and was fully sectioned by an extension to the original excavation area. The base of the ditch lay 2·10 m. below the present ground surface. Its original width was unclear, as it was cut to both north and south by later quarrying (FIG. 4). The lower fill of the ditch (FIG. 4, 8) was a fine chalky silt, apparently a 'slow' silt resulting from the gradual washing in of particles of chalk. There was within it a slightly darker layer containing rather more soil (FIG. 4, 7), but this may have represented some change in the composition of the material silting in, rather than a recut.

Overlying the silt was a thick layer of loose chalk rubble (FIG. 4, 6), dumped into the ditch when it had already silted up to over a metre above its original base.

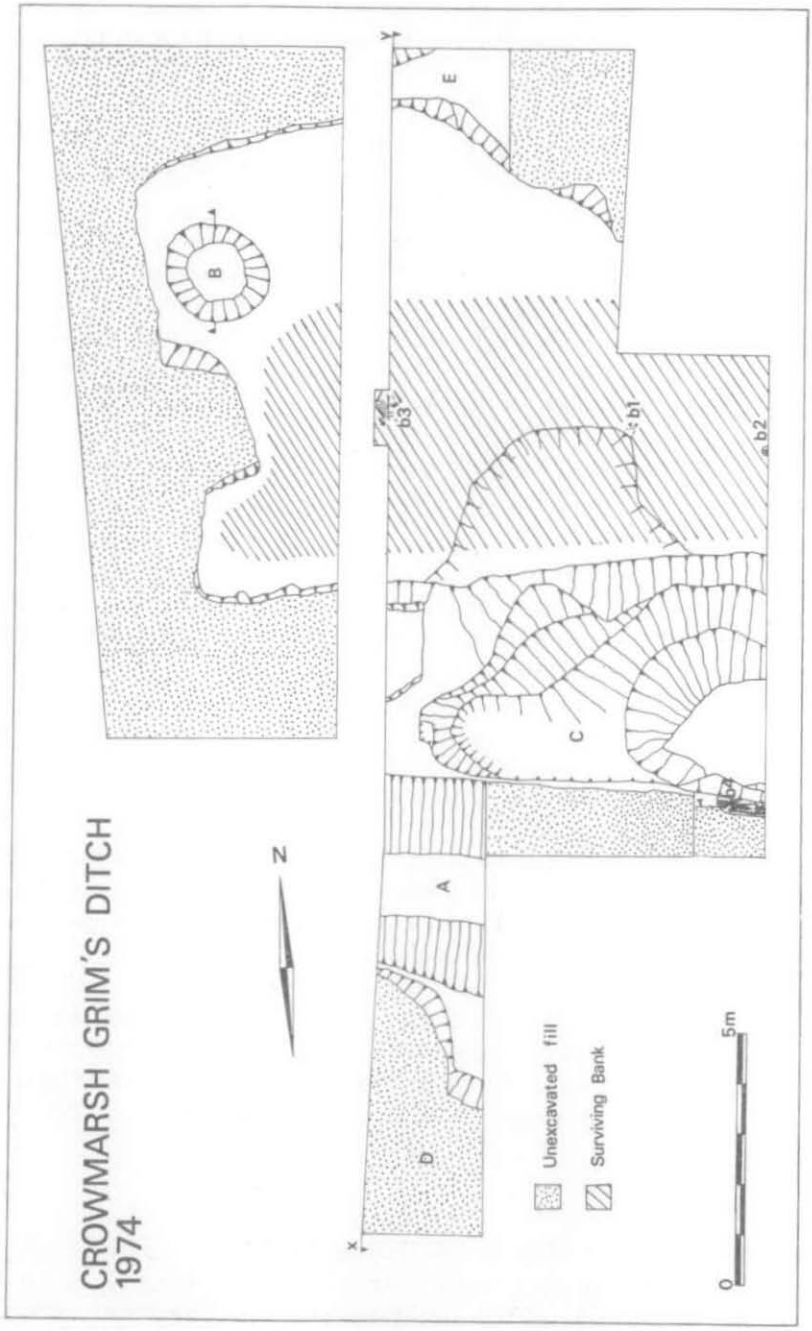

FIG. 3
Plan of Excavations.

Several sherds of coarse pottery were recovered from this rubble, all of which, like the material from the bank and old ground surface, were Iron Age in date.

After the dumping of the rubble the process of slow silting continued, though some larger fragments of chalk were still finding their way into the ditch-fill.

The Pit (FIG. 3, B and FIG. 5)

To the rear of the bank, west of the central baulk, was located a roughly circular pit, *c.* 2 m. in diameter and 1·10 m. deep below the level of the chalk natural. The fill of the pit (FIG. 5) was a loose chalk rubble with some soil, containing, scattered towards the top of the pit, fragments of hand-formed coarse vessels (*cf.* FIG. 5, 1 and below). The relationship between the pit and the surrounding layers, most crucially the layers of the bank, could not be determined, as the soil above and around the top of the pit had unfortunately been disturbed by the removal of an overlying tree and its roots before the excavation. The material of the pit's fill however was very similar to that forming the core of the bank.

Quarrying

Much of the area opened during the excavation proved to have been disturbed by quarrying (FIG. 3, C, D, E ; FIG. 4, 9, 10, 11). These chalk pits, alongside the road and at the point of the first outcropping of chalk on the east side of the river valley, were clearly extensive. A large depression south of the site, opposite the entrance to Carmel College, was a massive chalk pit, the northern lip of which lay within the excavated area (FIG. 3 ; FIG. 4, 10).

In addition to the disturbance of the areas immediately to the north and to the south of the earthwork, a linear quarry (FIG. 3, C) had been excavated along the front of the bank. This feature, almost four metres deep against the east section of the excavated area, had unfortunately destroyed the crucial stratigraphy at the front of the bank (FIG. 4). It had apparently been deeply excavated to extract large, solid blocks of chalk which the upper strata of the natural chalk could not provide. This was clear from the manner in which the bottom could be seen to have been cut, where several tool marks survived. The blocks would have been dragged up to the west where the quarry became considerably shallower.

The fill of the quarry was for the most part a loose chalk rubble with some soil, though its upper layers were formed of a finer, ' slow ' silt, from the bottom of which, immediately above the rubble, several sherds of a late medieval vessel were recovered (FIG. 5, 5). The line of the quarry could be traced up into the trees to the east for some 20 m., where it could be seen to end, the bank assuming a broader and less exaggerated profile.

Burials

The fragmentary remains of three inhumation burials were found in the body of the bank, and a fourth a little to the south on the lip of the ditch. Their condition can be attributed to the erosion of the earthwork and the disturbance of its upper layers. Fragments of human bone were recovered from the upper fill of the quarry, whither they had almost certainly been washed down from the face of the bank.

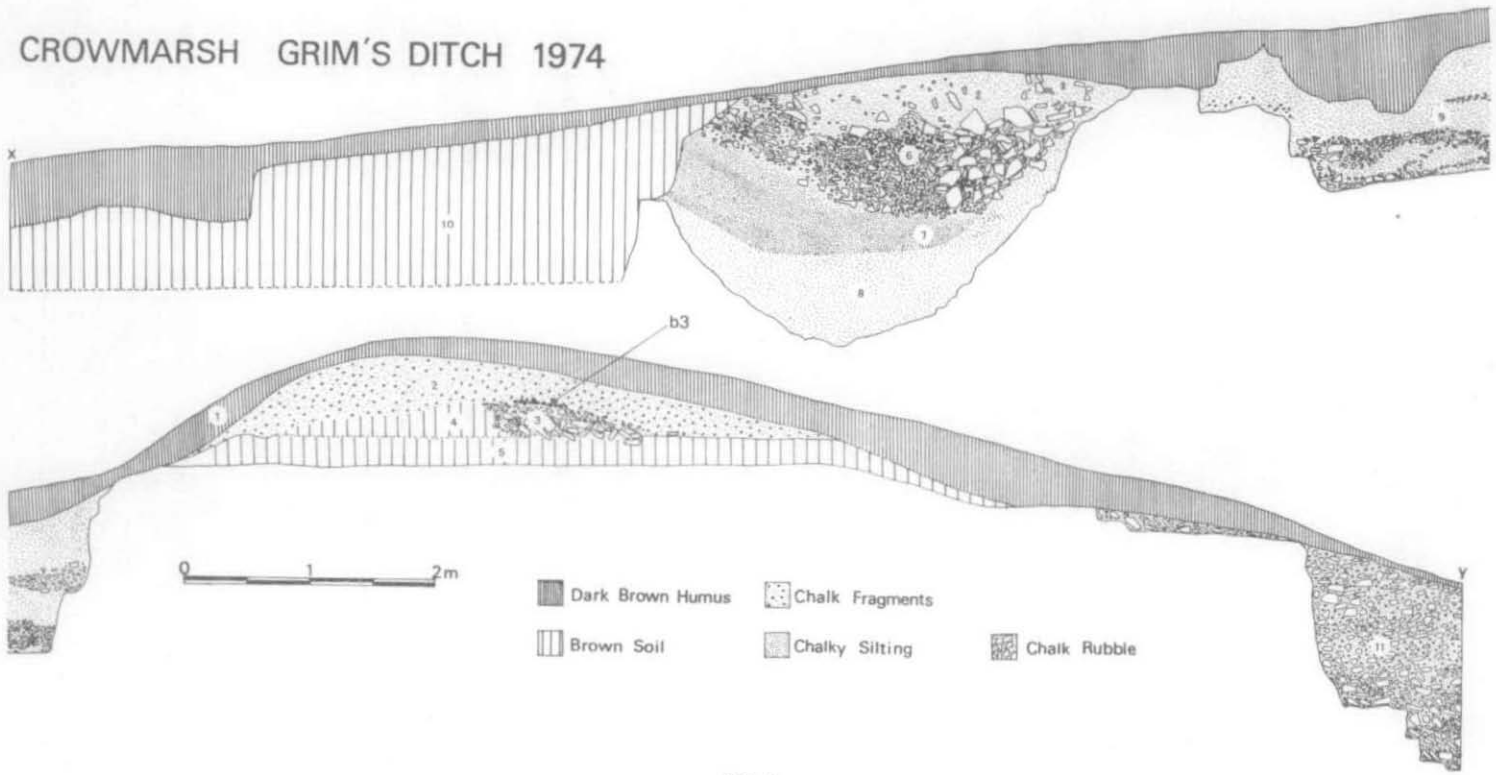

FIG. 4
Section through the Earthwork.

Burial 1

Before the excavation, human bones were found during tree-felling (FIG. 3, b1). These were few and fragmentary, mainly rib bones with a few fragments of scapula. There were insufficient to indicate either the attitude of the body, or any characteristics of the individual.

Burial 2

This burial consisted of a few rib bones and vertebrae, apparently articulated, located during excavation against the east section of the site (FIG. 3, b2). Like those of Burial 1, they lay at a depth of only 0·20 m. below the modern ground surface, in the disturbed upper levels of the bank, in which no trace of a grave-cut could be distinguished. The disturbed nature of these levels makes it possible that Burials 1 and 2 consist of the bones of a single individual. As with Burial 1, little information can be derived from the bones of Burial 2, but few as they were, the alignment of the surviving bones did suggest that the body was orientated north-south, across the line of the bank.

Burial 3 (FIG. 3, b3)

The burial consisted again of a fragmentary inhumation, though articulated and slightly more complete than Burials 1 and 2. The ribcage and vertebrae survived, with the left scapula, humerus and radius. The body had apparently been laid north-south across the line of the bank, with the head to the south. The erosion of the bank and the disturbance of its upper layers had resulted in the loss of the skull and legs, leaving only that part of the body lying most centrally in the heart of the bank. The burial lay at a depth of 0·50 m. below the modern ground surface, immediately on top of the undisturbed chalk rubble. No trace of a grave-cut could be distinguished (FIG. 4).

Burial 4

This inhumation lay, not in the bank like the other three, but on the northern lip of the ditch, which had already silted up considerably when the burial was inserted. The body was extended, and had been aligned west-east along the line of the ditch. The shape of the grave could be distinguished although it had been cut away to the north by the linear quarry (FIG. 3, 4) which had removed the left arm, pelvis, and leg. The bones lay at a depth of 0·65 m. below the modern ground surface. The grave was not totally excavated as the lower part ran into the east section of the site.

THE FINDS

POTTERY

1 'Saucepan pot.' External surface dark grey/brown, smoothed. Internal surface dark grey, smoothed. Fabric grey/brown sandy with flint grit. From pit (FIG. 3, B).

2 Rim of jar. External surface brown/grey sandy. Internal surface ditto. Fabric brown, sandy with some flint grit. From chalk rubble in bank (FIG. 4, 3).

3 Rim of jar. External surface brown, sandy. Internal surface grey, sandy. Fabric dark grey, sandy. From body of the bank (FIG. 4, 2).

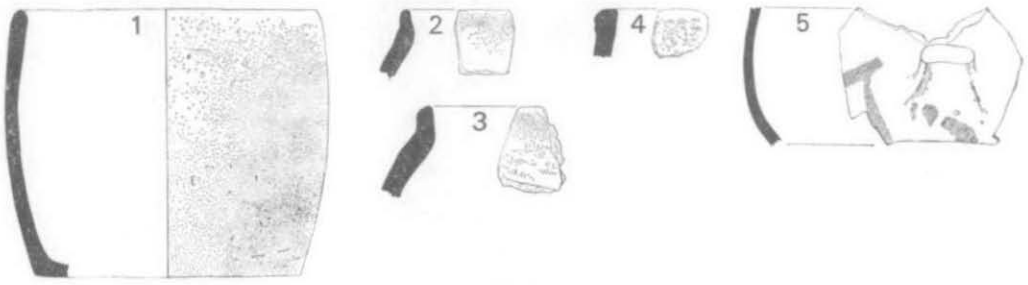

FIG. 5
The Pottery. Scale ¼.

4 Rim with stabbed decoration. External surface reddish brown with protruding grits. Internal surface ditto. Fabric reddish brown with heavy flint grit. From chalk rubble in the bank (FIG. 4, 3).

5 Part of medieval baluster jug with handle. Glazed externally with green/grey lead glaze with brown and dark green mottles, decorated with brown glazed linear pattern. Fabric hard, light grey, sandy. From above fast silt in linear quarry.

THE MOLLUSCAN REMAINS. By MARK ROBINSON

Methods

A column of soil samples was taken from both the ditch section and the old soil buried beneath the bank (FIG. 6). The layers sampled were as follows :

(a) The Ditch

Layer no.	*Depth below surface (m.)*	
1	0–0·12	Modern topsoil. Dark brown stone-free humic loam with leaf litter on the surface.
6a	0·12–0·33	Yellow-brown chalky loam.
6b	0·33–0·54	Pale grey, very chalky loam with many chalk fragments.
6c	0·54–1·02	Angular chalk rubble.
7	1·02–1·58	Pale brown, very chalky loam with chalk flecks. There is a more chalky band within it.
8	1·58–2·25	Finely powdered chalk with many larger chalk fragments.

(b) The buried soil

5	0–0·25	Pale brown loam with many chalk particles.
5	0·25–0·29	Weathered natural. Finely powdered chalk.

3½ lb. of each sample was washed through a stack of sieves down to 0·5 mm. and the residue sorted for molluscan remains. Towards the end of the sorting process it was realized that calcareous granules, probably from slugs of the genus *Arion*, were present. All that can be said is that they occurred in quite large numbers from the lowermost two layers of the ditch.

The identifications are presented in Table 1 giving the minimum number of individuals in the samples for each species. Histograms show the total number of molluscs, excluding *Ceciliodes acicula*[1] for each sample and the percentages of various species and groups of species are of the total.

[1] A burrowing species which has been found alive at a depth of up to 2·0 m. J. G. Evans, *Land Snails in Archaeology* (1972), 168. Where references have not been given for details of molluscan ecology, they have been taken from the above work.

There are three groups on the histogram, the *Zontidae*, *Carychium*/*Discus* and the ' other woodland species ', which make up the shade-loving species. In addition, a plot has been made for *Retinella radiatula*/*Punctum* because they are less fastidious in their requirements of moisture and shade than the other members of the groups to which they belong.[2] *Cochli-*

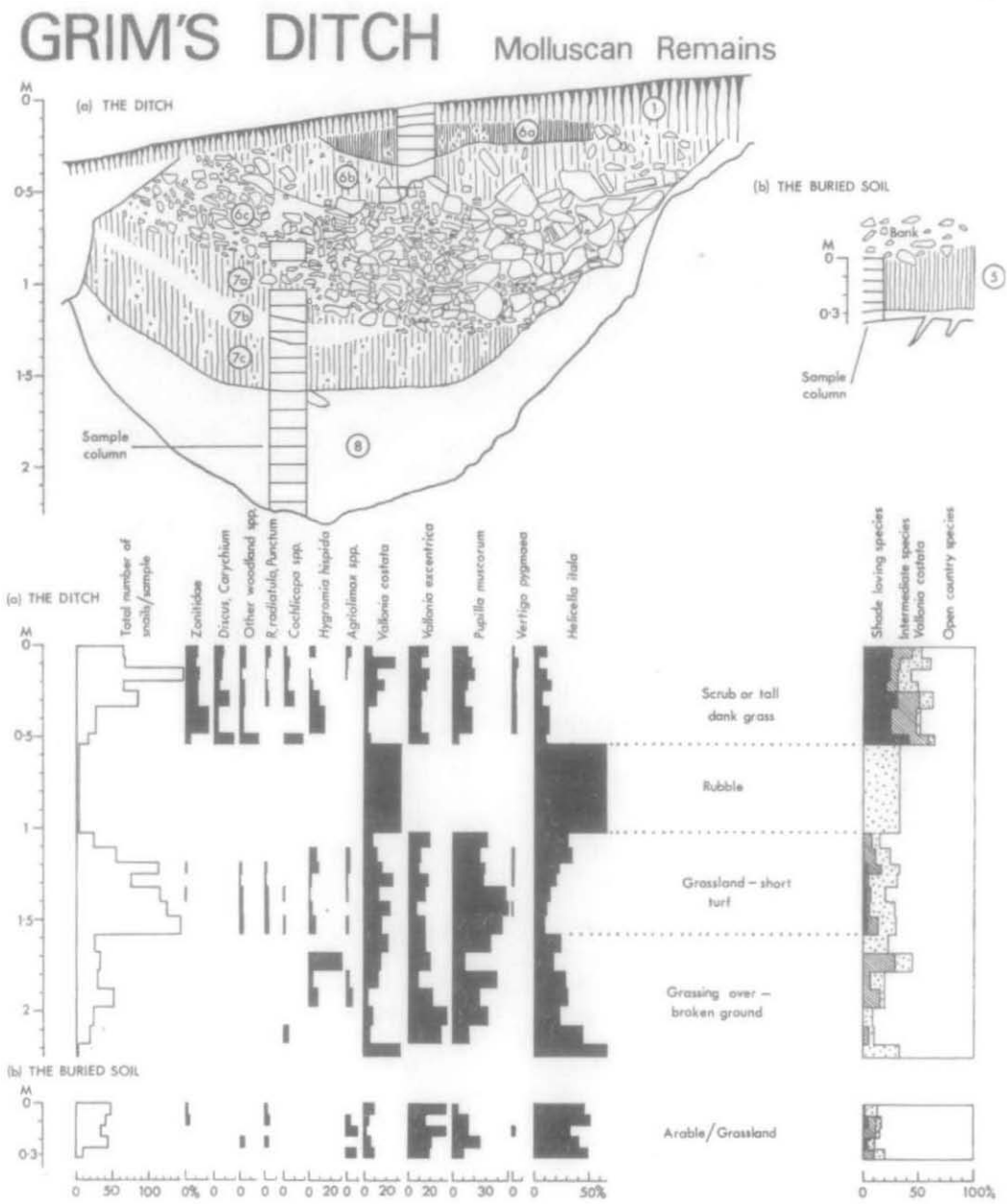

FIG. 6

Grim's Ditch. The sections sampled and their molluscan histograms.

[2] *Ibid.*, 195–196.

TABLE 1

Grim's Ditch, Mongewell
Mollusca from (a) The Ditch, and (b) The Buried Soil

Depth below surface (metres)	(a) 2·25 to 2·18	2·18 to 2·08	2·08 to 1·98	1·98 to 1·88	1·88 to 1·78	1·78 to 1·68	1·68 to 1·58	1·58 to 1·48	1·48 to 1·40	1·40 to 1·30	1·30 to 1·25	1·25 to 1·19	1·19 to 1·10	1·10 to 1·02	1·02 to 0·54	0·54 to 0·48	0·48 to 0·33	0·33 to 0·25	0·25 to 0·19	0·19 to 0·12	0·12 to 0·06	0·06 to 0·0	(b) 0·36 to 0·30	0·30 to 0·24	0·24 to 0·18	0·18 to 0·12	0·12 to 0·06	0·06 to 0·0
Pomatias elegans (Müller)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	—	—	—	—	—	—
Carychium tridentatum (Risso)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	2	1	12	3	11	5	3	—	—	—	—	—	—
Cochlicopa spp.	—	1	—	—	—	—	—	2	—	1	—	—	—	—	—	3	—	8	3	8	4	2	—	—	—	—	—	—
Vertigo pygmaea (Draparnaud)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	—	1	2	1	—	—	—	1	3	2	5	3	1	—	—	—	1	—	—
V. angustior Jeffreys	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Vertigo sp.	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Pupilla muscorum (Linné)	—	3	8	13	12	4	9	64	63	55	21	35	14	8	—	1	5	10	9	31	12	9	—	1	11	5	6	3
Acanthinula aculeata (Müller)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	2	—	—	1	3	1	1	—	—	—	—	—	—
Vallonia costata (Müller)	1	1	2	2	4	5	6	24	30	16	20	19	7	2	1	1	1	10	12	18	19	5	—	1	3	1	2	5
V. excentrica Sterki	—	6	9	12	3	8	4	22	9	19	13	11	6	5	—	3	3	11	11	28	8	12	—	2	10	12	7	17
Ena obscura (Müller)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	—	—	—	—	1	—	1	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Clausila bidentata (Ström)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	—	1	—	—	2	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Cecilioides acicula (Müller)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	16	6	5	4	8	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Helicigona lapicida (Linné)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	—	—	—	—	—	—
Helix nemoralis Linné	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	—	1	—	—	—	—	—	—
Cepaea spp.	—	—	—	1	—	—	—	1	—	—	—	1	1	1	—	—	1	1	1	—	1	1	—	—	—	—	—	—
Hygromia hispida (Linné)	—	—	—	4	1	10	—	9	3	1	1	10	4	—	—	—	4	8	2	2	—	4	—	—	—	—	—	—
Helicella itala (Linné)	2	9	6	16	9	6	7	15	16	19	16	28	20	8	2	2	4	7	11	19	3	8	—	5	19	12	22	23
Helicella sp.	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	—	—	—	—	—	—
Punctum pygmaeum (Draparnaud)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	4	3	3	1	2	—	—	—	—	—	2	1	1	1	1	—	—	2	—	—	—
Discus rotundatus (Müller)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	—	—	—	—	—	2	—	—	—	—	—	—
Vitrea spp.	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	3	2	4	1	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Oxychilus cellarius (Müller)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	—	—	—	1	—	1	1	—	1	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Retinella radiatula (Alder)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	—	—	1	2	—	—	—	—	2	1
R. pura (Alder)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	2	2	—	4	2	4	—	—	—	—	—	—
R. nitidula (Draparnaud)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	3	4	5	12	2	2	—	—	—	—	—	—
Limax, Agriolimax spp.	—	—	—	3	1	—	—	3	—	1	1	4	2	1	—	—	—	—	—	1	1	3	—	1	—	4	3	—

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copa spp., *Hygromia hispida* and *Limax/Agriolimax* with their wide range of habitats make up the Intermediate species. Finally, *Vallonia costata*, *V. excentrica*, *Pupilla* and *Helicella* are all species of light, dry habitats—the open country species. *Vallonia costata* has been split off from the rest because it has a tendency to enter shaded habitats in higher numbers than the others.

Species Present

Of the minimum of 24 species definitely present, only one is of interest in its own right. This is the single individual of *Vertigo angustior* from sample 0·25–0·33 m. of the ditch.[3] The species is rare and has never been discovered living in Oxfordshire.[4] It is described as being a marsh species[5] so seems completely out of place in a group of snails which indicate that the ditch was dry, but shading over (see below). There is no indication that marsh conditions ever existed on the site.

It is interesting that two other members of this genus, *V. substriata* and *V. pygmaea*, live in both terrestrial and marsh habitats.[6]

Ecology of the Deposits

(a) The Ditch

There is no doubt that the ditch was dry throughout its life for no obligate marsh dwellers are present and *Helicella itala*, found in reasonable numbers from all the samples, never occurs in marshes.[7]

Layer 8, 1·58–2·25 m., represented a quite rapid silting of the ditch due to weathering of the sides and bank. The snail numbers are not very large, averaging about thirty per sample. They all belong either to the open country group, those species which require a light and dry habitat, or the Intermediate group. *Helicella itala* starts as the dominant species, a snail which favours short dry grass,[7] but is gradually replaced by *Pupilla muscorum* which has less strict requirements about the length of grass, but can favour earth bare of vegetation.[8] It is likely that this change was due to the lengthening of the grass as it gradually established itself on the eroding sides of the ditch. The other two species present in reasonable numbers during this phase are *Vallonia costata* and *V. excentrica*, both open country species.

The next phase of the infilling process, layer 7, 1·02–1·58 m., represented a slowing-down in the rate of deposition. This is reflected by the increased number of molluscs present in a sample, around 100. The fauna of the ditch is that of a grassland which has *P. muscorum* comprising about 50% of the total with *H. itala* low. The other common open country species, *V. costata* and *V. excentrica*, never reach the number of *Pupilla*. Shade-loving species first make their appearance in this layer but remain consistently very low in numbers, never rising above 5%. This suggests that the grass of the previous layer does not progress to tall herbage. For the most part the shade-lovers are *Punctum pygmaeum* and *Retinella radiatula* which are less strict about their shade requirements.

Towards the top of this layer, total numbers decline, the shade-loving species disappear and *H. itala* regains its former numbers. This suggests a return to the more disturbed type of habitat present previously. The chalkier bank within the upper part of the layer 7b, supports the idea.

Conditions suddenly changed with layer 6c, 0·54–1·02 m., rapidly deposited chalk rubble. Only three snails were present in the sample from it.

Above the rubble, in layer 6b, 0·33–0·54 m., a snail population was re-established, but numbers are low, reaching 27 individuals in a sample. For the first time woodland species make up a reasonable proportion, *c.* 25%, indicating that the habitat shaded over.

[3] I am grateful to Dr. J. G. Evans for confirming the identification of *V. angustior* and his helpful comments on this report.

[4] A. E. Ellis, ' Census of the Distribution of British Non-Marine Mollusca ', *J. Conch.*, 23 (1951).

[5] A. E. Ellis, *British Snails* (1969), 151.

[6] *Op. cit.* note 1, 142–3.

[7] *Ibid.*, 180–182.

[8] *Ibid.*, 146–150.

Open country species, however, do not fall below 40% so this does not mean afforestation, only tall, dank, ungrazed vegetation or perhaps scrub having established itself in the ditch.

With layer 6a, 0·12–0·33 m., the rate of silting slowed down, as shown by the lower chalk content of the soil and the higher molluscan numbers, about eighty per sample. The ratio between the different species and the conclusion drawn from them remains the same.

Finally, the modern topsoil, layer 1, 0–0·12 m., has similar species numbers to the previous layer, reflecting the elm scrub which grew on the site prior to excavation.

(b) The Buried Soil

The weathered chalk, 0·25–0·29 m., was free from molluscan remains but the ancient topsoil, layer 5, 0–0·25 m., produced a rather small molluscan fauna, averaging 42 snails per sample. Open country species predominate, with no more than 5% shade-loving species and these being *Punctum pygmaeum* and *Retinella radiatula*. *Helicella itala* is the dominant species, averaging just below 50%. Typical of the high *Helicella* population, numbers of *Pupilla muscorum* are relatively low and *Vallonia excentrica* is dominant over *V. costata*.[9] This is typical of short grassland.

The soil structure, however, was that of a ploughsoil. There was no humic turf line and it was pale with a uniform scatter of chalk particles. Also, a higher number of snails per sample would be expected were it grassland.

The alternatives are that either it was an unusual arable molluscan population or that the snails themselves were from grassland, but that it had recently been ploughed. Molluscan populations in arable situations with high numbers of *H. itala* have been recorded[10] and the second most abundant species, *V. excentrica*, can be common in arable land.

Conclusions

The molluscan fauna of the first phase of silting, layer 8, is just what would be expected for a dry chalk cut ditch. In the next phase, however, when the rate of silting had slowed down, the expected tall, dank vegetation, with resultant shade-loving snails, failed to establish itself.[11] The shade-lovers were able to reach the site, for they are present in extremely low numbers, and the expected large proportion of them occurs when silting was resumed after the rapid deposit of chalk rubble. This suggests that long vegetation was in some way being prevented from establishing itself.

A possible reason is that the ditch was periodically being cleared out. Confirmation of this is seen in the return to more unstable conditions towards the end of this phase and the chalk rubble, layer 6c, seemingly cutting the chalkier band, 7b.

The implication is that the ditch was kept open and maintained for a period of time rather than having been built to counter a specific threat, then abandoned. Dr. J. G. Evans, however, suggests that the open conditions were due to grazing by sheep and that breaks in the soil surface caused by them resulted in rushes of chalk rubble in the ditch.

The layer of rubble, layer 6b, was rapidly deposited, either due to the slighting of the bank or perhaps early quarrying. Above it developed the dank vegetation or scrub which persisted until the excavation. Certainly there was never any greater cover of trees than the present day.

Whilst the buried ground surface was of an arable soil, it seems likely that ploughing had only just begun on what had been grassland.

DISCUSSION

The earthwork seems to have been of fairly straightforward construction. A substantial steep-sided ditch, originally 2·50 m.–3·00 m. and *c.* 4 m. wide, was excavated out of the chalk natural and the material thrown up to the north to make a

[9] *Ibid.*, 182, 159. This also occurs in layers of the ditch where the decline of *Helicella* is reflected in the rise of *Pupilla* and *V. costata*.

[10] *Ibid.*, 341.

[11] *Ibid.*, e.g. the ditch of Badbury earthwork, p. 340.

bank. Although the front of the bank was later destroyed by chalk quarrying, the fine 'slow' silt fill of the lower part of the ditch might indicate that the upcast was retained in some way, and therefore it might be justifiable to imagine some sort of timber revetment or palisade along the face of the earthwork, both holding back the bank and adding to its effectiveness as an obstacle. The preparation and erection of the timbers of such a revetment would make even more formidable the enormous task that the construction of the earthwork represents. The loose chalk rubble layer (FIG. 4, 6) in the ditch above the slow silt may represent a levelling of the bank. It was cut by the quarry to the south, so could not be derived from that, and it contained Iron Age pottery.

The date of the earthwork's erection remains problematic, in spite of the pottery recovered from the site. Sherds of Iron Age pottery were found both in the old soil horizon and in the body of the bank, and it might be reasonable to regard these as not only providing a *terminus post quem* for the earthwork's construction, but as being contemporary with it, unless the small pit (FIG. 3, B) located at the rear of the bank was earlier than it. The crucial question is whether the pit, typical in shape and dimensions of an Iron Age 'storage pit', is in fact an indicator of an Iron Age settlement in the immediate area, from which could have come all the Iron Age pottery recovered from the site. No other features were located during the excavation, or observed either during the mechanical stripping of the site or during careful walking of the ploughed field to the north-east, but the whole area had been so extensively quarried that this cannot be regarded as decisive evidence against an Iron Age settlement in the area.

The pit contained fragments of two pottery vessels, one (FIG. 5, 1) a distinctive 'saucepan pot', and some animal bone, these finds being fairly typical of the kind of domestic rubbish frequently recovered from such back-filled pits on Iron Age settlement sites. The actual fill, however, is not typical, being sizeable chalk rubble, rather than the refuse-containing occupation soil generally constituting the fill of such pits. It might be suggested that the pit was back-filled at the time of the earthwork's construction with rubble derived from the ditch, and so the pit may not be indicative of a separate phase of settlement but rather be associated with the ditch builders themselves. As sizeable fragments of only two vessels were found, sherds of no other vessels being present in the pit itself, the rubbish in the fill of the pit might be the debris of a short occupation. One might therefore regard the pit as being associated with the ditch-builders, used either for temporary storage, or perhaps even, with its heap of upcast chalk, as a laying-out marker of the line of the bank, but either way associated and contemporary with the earthwork's erection.

The pottery recovered from the plough soil below the bank was much abraded, but all the sherds were hand made in a coarse sandy fabric which can be safely regarded as Iron Age.[12]

The material recovered from the body of the bank was similar, but one or two fragments were more readily identifiable and are illustrated here (FIG. 5, 2, 3 and 4). Nos. 2 and 3 are rim sherds of vessels which Harding[13] would classify as 'globular

[12] A section recorded at SU 620878 gave a similar impression of pre-bank ploughing. H. Case and D. Sturdy, *Oxoniensia*, XXIV (1959), 99.

[13] D. W. Harding, *The Iron Age in the Upper Thames Basin* (1972).

jars ', and which have been identified elsewhere in mid-Iron Age contexts in the region.[14] The rim (no. 4) with its heavy flint grit and decorated rim may well be pre-Iron Age. The ' saucepan pot ' (no. 1) from the pit was the most distinctive vessel recovered from the site and would be dated, on Cunliffe's estimate,[15] to the 3rd to 1st centuries B.C. The second vessel from the pit was more fragmentary, lacking in rim and base, and is not illustrated, but its globular shape and black sandy fabric would suggest a similar date.

The earthwork as a whole, its significance, its dating, and indeed its extent, have been previously discussed in several papers,[16] and it is not the intention here, within the context of an excavation report, to enter into a long discussion of these issues. It is only regretted that the excavation was unable to throw more light onto the problems, though the amount of information that a single cutting can provide on a substantial linear earthwork such as this must always be limited.

The pottery evidence from the bank and sealed soil horizon would seem to reinforce Bradley's preference for an Iron Age date for the earthwork,[17] but the possibility that this material might be entirely derived from an Iron Age settlement, represented by one surviving pit, considerably pre-dating the dyke, must be borne in mind. There is on the other hand no evidence to support Hughes' thesis of a construction date in the 6th century A.D.,[18] though in a rural earthwork of this kind the likelihood of finding contemporary artefacts incorporated in the bank is infinitely less than in an earthwork at an occupation site, for instance.

Crawford,[19] Hughes,[20] Wheeler,[21] and the Victoria County History[22] have all grouped the Mongewell earthwork with the other Chiltern earthworks, and Bradley, in a careful and detailed study of the field evidence,[23] tentatively suggests a connection. Dyer, on the other hand, does not include the earthwork in his consideration of the Chiltern ditches.[24] Dyer's exclusion of the Mongewell ditch seems justifiable in that it does seem to serve a totally independent function, as a barrier to movement both up the east side of the river valley, and along the Icknield Way. It runs to Nuffield in a straight line, altering course only where it veers very slightly to the north at *c.* SU 614880, running past the lake at Mongewell to the river, as suggested by Bradley.[25] Just before it reaches the hill top at Timber's Barn, Nuffield, on which it seems to have been sighted, the ditch apparently turns southwards through three sides of a square to form the ' salient ' which Bradley parallels at Chichester.[26] The evidence for the west and east sides of this salient, at least as features of com-

[14] E.g. at Appleford (1973), Farmoor (1974). O.A.U. excavations : reports forthcoming.
[15] B. W. Cunliffe, *Iron Age Communities in Britain* (1974), 156.
[16] Principally M. Hughes, ' Grimsditch and Cuthwulf's Expedition to the Chilterns in A.D. 571 ', *Antiquity*, V (1931), 291–314. O. G. S. Crawford, ' The Chiltern Grim's Ditches ', *Antiquity*, V (1931), 161–171. R. E. M. Wheeler, ' London and the Grim's Ditches ', *Ant. J.*, XIV (1934), 254–263. J. F. Dyer, ' The Chiltern Grim's Ditch ', *Antiquity*, XXXVII (1963), 46–49. R. Bradley, ' The South Oxfordshire Grim's Ditch and its Significance ', *Oxoniensia*, XXXIII (1968), 1–13.
[17] Bradley, *op. cit.*
[18] Hughes, *op. cit.*
[19] Crawford, *op. cit.*
[20] Hughes, *op. cit.*
[21] Wheeler, *op. cit.*
[22] *Victoria County History of Oxfordshire*, Vol. II (1907), 339–342.
[23] Bradley, *op. cit.*
[24] Dyer, *op. cit.*
[25] Bradley, *op. cit.*
[26] *Ibid.*, 10.

parable dimensions to the earthwork proper, is not strong, though these stretches would rationalize the two disconnected west-east lengths of earthwork lying between Nuffield and Hayden Farm.[27] Today the ditch appears to end at a field boundary at SU 665871 and cannot be traced at all in the pasture field beyond. Neither the Victoria County History nor the Ordnance Survey, even on the basis of O. G. S. Crawford's painstaking field work, shows the two ' missing 'stretches as more than the ' Course of ' Grim's Ditch, and we are left regretting the unwillingness of Dr. Plot to dismount and investigate further[28] at a time before modern agriculture obscured the field evidence if it existed.

Certainly if the earthwork was never more than the straight three and a half mile section shown in FIG. 1 then it appears fairly straightforward in function, running from the Thames to the high ground, controlling communication up the lower ground of the river valley, east of the river, and up the Icknield Way to the north-east. This limited view of the extent of the Mongewell ditch would mark it out from all the other Chiltern earthworks, as it would barely reach the clay with flints.

The erection of such a substantial earthwork, running for at least three and a half miles, represents a massive outlay in terms of manpower, and some political unit must have been responsible for its construction. It is surely a tribal boundary, a barrier to and control of movement northwards. If the pottery found in the 1974 excavations is accepted as contemporary with the earthwork's construction, some thought might be given to Cunliffe's recent proposition that the era of the ' saucepan pot ' was an era of territorial definition.[29] The situation which led to the construction of the boundary can only be a matter for speculation, as must be the identity of the ditch builders. Their centre of influence may have been north-east up the Icknield Way amongst the hill forts of the Chiltern escarpment, or perhaps to the north, up the river valley in the Dorchester area, with Castle Hill, Long Wittenham, and its hinterland, the fertile gravel terraces of the Upper Thames with their farming settlements.

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[27] *Cf.* Bradley, *op. cit.* Fig. 3.

[28] R. Plot, *The Natural History of Oxfordshire* (1677), 317. ' . . . the woods scarce admitting a foot passage, much less for a horse, I could not conveniently trace it any further. '

[29] Cunliffe, *op. cit.* note 15, 260.